



## Greetings from the Golden State!

**Sometimes a Great Notion...** The plan was simple: Complete the final segment of our grand journey with a flourish. We'd do this by 1) relishing the sights *on site* – no settling for a passive “windshield view” of the desert landscape, and 2) taking full advantage of any (and all!) historical sights or curiosities that tempted us along the byways and in the towns. To honor the sense of adventure that TJ brought to this quest for roadside enlightenment, we would meet the journey with the same depth of gusto that launched and fueled us through seven states. Somehow, though... it wasn't surprising that with so many miles behind us, and only a few remaining ahead, we finally hit **the wall**. Or, to put it another way – the fuel gauge tracking our enthusiasm was beginning to run on empty. Funny how it didn't matter if TJ or Seagram was in the driver's seat – we managed to find abundant enthusiasm in each day on the road... even when we found ourselves implementing Plan B first thing! Over those final miles, though, our vigor and moxie devolved into a count-down of the hours and days until we reached what became known as the **finish line**. The often lengthy stretches of highway and tight confines of space (the car, the suitcase, the shoebox economy accommodations...) began to lose their appeal and romance about the time we approached the California border. At first I thought I was the one losing steam – after all Seagram was new to the mission. But somehow the driver's seat imbued him with “baggage” of having been on the road throughout. Somehow he felt the toll of the distances and the days as keenly as I did. Indeed, State # 8 would be surprising in more ways than one...

**Needling Each Other.** More and more Seagram and I found that we'd jokingly lapse into the routine exclamation of every child's favorite road trip query: “Are we there yet?” Thankfully, we were adult enough to take a deep breath, take stock and admit that yes, we were closer and closer at each of these verbal outbursts. Evidence of such progress came after crossing into California – a detour into Needles. A well-known way station to generations of railroad travelers and motorists, Needles originally flourished through the presence of the Santa Fe Railroad. Acknowledging its surroundings, the town's name was inspired by the sharp, spiky peaks of nearby mountain ranges. It seems that almost everyone on road trip to (or from) the coast made a stop there, or knows someone who has. Our list of sites to explore was generous, and one that we thought would provide context for the area's history. Beginning with the site of the Old Trails Inn (formerly Palms Motel), we proceeded on to the vacant, but still grand and handsome train depot named for Padre Francisco Garcés – thought to have first made contact with the native Mojave people in the 1770s. We were pleased to hear that plans are afoot to restore El Garcés – both the depot and Harvey House in the center of town. Seagram's interest in the story of Harvey Houses and Hotels deepened as we continued to see them, and he

found it hard to get away even when we needed to be moving on down the road. The flood of spirits, memories and history that he sensed in the landmarks was palpable. On to the stalwart Jedro's Wagon Wheel Restaurant for a substantial early lunch stop – our taste for tuna melts and omelets was totally sated. Happily we caught sight of the Historic Needles Theater as we headed back to the highway.

**I Can See for Miles and Miles...** Just after our meal, Seagram complained of feeling tired and achy – so much so that curled up in the backseat (with the height of his frame, stretching out was not an option!)... and I took over at the wheel). We worked the switcheroo just before leaving Needles proper. An adjacent sign reminded me that we had 150 odd miles of the Mojave Desert ahead (and no services for the Route 66 stretch; limited services for the interstate traveler...) This alert makes an impression when you're driving a high maintenance vintage car...how I longed for my trusty Toyota. Even so, I quickly checked all the dash gauges, and steeled myself with the ring of Seagram's proclamation that all belts, fluids and parts looked "factory" new. What could I do but put the pedal to the metal, face the expansive Mohave, and say to myself with a fearless grin "*bring it on*"... Instead of making the copious stops we'd planned for, I focused on experiencing the inland ocean of the desert... all the while keeping an eye on Seagram's dead-to-the-world backseat slumber. While taking in the vastness of the Mojave's arid expanses, I also managed to get a 65 mph (or so...) glimpse of the roadway's handful of ghost towns. Like so many of the towns we've driven through or passed by over the weeks, these map points were all but forgotten when I-40 became the motorway of choice. From behind the windshield my zesty (but legal) speed, I waved at and wondered about: Goffs, Fenner, Chambless (to the west is a substantial remnant of the Road Runner's Retreat sign), Amboy (another great sign relic – this time for Roy's Motel and Café, which in its time also included a gas station), Ludlow, Bagdad, Newberry Springs (the Bagdad Café site actually used in the movie, plus an old friend – a Whiting Brothers gas station sign), and Daggett.

**Dreaming the Days Away.** In Barstow it was obvious that we would be off the road for a good part of the week. After checking in to the motel, I tried to reason with Seagram about getting to an urgent care center. In spite of his ashen face and blood-shot eyes, he could summon enough bombast and ego to insist that I track some "medicinals" at the local drug of discount store. With the bottles and boxes in hand, he headed to his room and proceeded to sleep for 48 hours straight. When I wasn't sitting with, or seeing to, him (he never did explain much about his affliction, but diligently woke up to dose his self-prescribed rotation of over-the-counter syrups and tablets...), suddenly I had time to roam about town. Like so many of the burgs and cities we've encountered, Barstow owes its progress to the arrival of the Santa Fe Railroad. The municipality is even named for a former president of the line, William Barstow Strong. The old Harvey House had been saved from demolition, and now the Fred Harvey Casa del Desierto housed the Amtrak and Greyhound stations, plus the Mother Road Route 66 Museum and Western America Railroad Museum. It was a delight to take in oddments, memorabilia and curio collections recalling the halcyon days of the highway and the west. Seeing all the minutia put me in mind of the countless stops and attractions TJ and I had dutifully

investigated as we soldiered on along the Mother Road. After a third day or rest (in a waking state, with plenty of TV and two gentle forays back into solid food), Seagram had suddenly reconstituted into his fearless and hungry-for-adventure self. Fortunately we were able to work in a few of Barstow's other civic charms – the usual tour of historic buildings and sign relics, plus the Mojave River Museum and even the Desert Discovery Center (exhibits and trails... Seagram was thrilled to stretch his legs!).

By the time we approached Victorville, Seagram was back behind the wheel, and ready for our next round of road food. Victorville originally prospered through the presence of the railroad and agriculture. As promised by an Internet guide, the town maintains its “vintage feel” even as it continues to be fast-growing. Cement manufacturing remains center of economy, and the small city's a jumping off point to outdoor recreation areas. We found the California Route 66 Museum housed in the old Red Rooster Café, and were enlivened by the New Corral Motel's neon sign (a “rearing horse”). When we reached Cajon Pass, and saw the Cajon Summit Inn's large sign flashing in neon, we knew that we were nearing Los Angeles in earnest.

**Promises to Keep.** Even though Seagram had begun to experience what I refer to as “Sunday night syndrome” (e.g. feeling anxious at returning to one's school or work routine after the weekend), he insisted that we stop for dinner in Rancho Cucamonga. He has a constant yen for old school steak houses – fine dining destination spots for which people drive miles out of their way. Faced with a handful of options, we finally opted for dinner at the Magic Lamp Steak House. Welcomed by a large yellow neon sign (a magic lamp, of course), that seemed to float in the dimness of dusk, we toasted TJ, the Mustang, each other, and the mystery of wanderlust as we tucked into sumptuous courses of celebratory fare. We could both all but smell the salty sea air of the Pacific as we settled the bill and headed out to find lodging for our last night on the road.

The last day of our trip was a blur. Stopping for breakfast before starting our final drive, I told Seagram that I'd been unsuccessful in trying to reach TJ. Neither phone nor texting nor email did the trick. Facebook seemed a bit far-fetched at this point in the game. I knew that he was out of pocket, and traveling to points beyond, but somehow his absence weighed on me. It seemed bittersweet – no, in all honesty sad and lonely – that TJ wouldn't see the end to his vision quest. His departure certainly launched a level of seeking in Seagram that he continued to meditate upon. But with practicalities suddenly more of a concern, we were all but in LA, and dare I say left to minister to a finicky vehicle with no instructions on how to proceed. None of that seemed important or imminent when we parted ways in Albuquerque. To his credit, Seagram was very cool about my melancholy and worry. As we continued on through suburb after suburb, it all ran together in front of me – a Jackson Pollock concoction of strip malls, fast food restaurants, big box stores, palm trees, houses, schools, malls – streets and cars. We stopped in Monrovia to grab a glimpse of the Aztec Hotel's remarkable temple-like exterior, and savor some much-needed coffee. While waiting for our orders to arrive, Seagram excused himself to make a phone call – likely letting some of his key “LA

People” know that he was again on the scene. After we paid and returned to the car, Seagram announced that we would press on to Santa Monica – “all other business could wait!” It was an unexpected change of heart and logistics – Plan A had us making various stops around the city, and getting to the Pier for sunset. OK... Whatever... Let’s do this thing.

**I Love LA.** Somehow I felt that I knew Southern California better than I really did. With so many years of seeing LA and its environs through the backdrops of innumerable TV shows and movies, it seemed as though I’d traversed the area time and again. But, nothing on a screen compares to the real-time motion, structure or choreography of this high energy city. Seagram deftly navigated the loops, the exchanges and the expressways as though he drove them every day. I had woefully underestimated his traffic savvy – but also got the vibe that he would be glad to throw the gear shift into park, and call his car service when we were at the finish line. Lulled into a comfortable ease as we proceeded through Santa Monica’s gracious neighborhoods and inviting streetscapes, I felt a spark of energy as Seagram make the final turn– and we saw the Pacific ahead. We looked at each other with smiles of relief and accomplishment– and talked about a ride on the famed Ferris Wheel at the Pier.

As we expected, parking was dear. Seagram dropped me off at the Pier’s entrance, and set out to find parking space. Walking down the boardwalk, I wondered if we could buy a bottle of champagne nearby. Somehow that celebratory element was lost in the fits and starts of the week. Nearing the water, I noticed a bag next to the railing, complete with fluted glasses and a frosted pink cork cover peaking out. Props to people with a plan, I thought. At the end of the Pier, I still saw no sign of Seagram... and had visions of him circling endlessly for a space. Focusing on the beauty and repetition of the tide, the sweet mist disappeared on my face, I felt a sense of completion and peace at what the three of us had done. Pioneers, trail hands and explorers in our own small and modern way. The rhythm of approaching steps contained my revelry–surely those were Seagram’s Luccheses traversing their final stage of the trip. As the steps froze, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and spun around to ask Seagram if the car was still in Santa Monica. Replying with a jokingly jaded “Well I surely hope so..”, TJ set down the bag of flutes and champagne, steadied himself on the rail, and said in a halting voice, “I wouldn’t have missed this moment for the world” As we began to catch up and fill in some blanks, Seagram appeared with an impish grin on his face. “Did I miss the Hollywood kiss?” he quizzed. In unison, TJ and I quipped “I’ll never tell...” After finding a bistro where we could enjoy tapas (and discretely, our bubbly), I learned that Seagram had tracked down TJ (the LA People, it turns out, are quite the talented lot), and arranged for our Hollywood ending. When we’d shared the better road stories, and had our fill of celebration, Seagram nabbed his gear and headed out to meet his writing partner. They had a meeting lined up for a new project in Santa Fe of all places! Seagram vowed to keep in touch, and said he was thinking about returning to the Southwest. But for now, international datelines called. TJ gave me a knowing look, and we both whispered in a conspiratorial and joyful tone: FERRIS WHEEL!

As we rocked and circled around, seeing the lights come up, and watching the sunset, TJ reported that the international deal he was set to work on fell through, and that the company he was anchoring was folding. Family feud among the owners, unpaid bills, lawyers circling... something that was all too common to his California years. While thinking of something wise and supportive to say, TJ's face became very calm.

"Hey...no need to say anything. It's all good. Once I get packed up here, I'm going to do a solo roam in the Mustang... and then think I'll head back to New Mexico. I can work and paint anywhere, and maybe Seagram and I can cook up a tasty project... so to speak". So, as do all journeys, this one ended where it began. The knowledge and experience we gain changes us, but it also brings us back to ourselves. Call it closure, or coming full circle, that night on the Santa Monica Pier found us right where we needed to be. And when TJ asked if I'd like to drive as far as Albuquerque with him when he was ready to roll, how could I resist such a homecoming? Luckily I had just enough leave left to ride shotgun one more time, be the second, and savor the road that inevitably brings us all home.